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ABSTRACT

A new parochialism is present in the United States. The view represents a foreclosure that anchors itself to Europe against a tide of non-European peoples. U.S. Eurocentrists proclaim union on the basis of race to counter the perceived threat of non-whites and to stifle dissenting voices from those who would contest the dominant order. An alternative parochialism celebrates a minority's exceptionalism, characterized by inventions of traditions, affirmations of fragile identities, and exclusion of others. Ethnic studies began as a broadly inclusive vision of U.S. history and culture. The approach sought to move the pivot by fracturing the universalism of the white male and repositioning gender, class, race, and sexuality from the periphery to the core. Asians in the United States can recenter the discourse. The internationalization of U.S. history is one element in the overall project of moving the pivot; gender, class, race, and sexuality also comprise axes upon which the national experience turn. This study of Asians in the United States recognizes that the contest is for a fundamental refiguring of the nation's social relations. (LBG)

# MOVING THE PIVOT: ASIANS AND AMERICAN HISTORY

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American Historical Association, Washington, D.C., December 27, 1992

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New parochialisms abound in the land. To the right, a parochialism celebrates America's exceptionalism -- characterized by Joyce Appleby in her 1992 presidential address to the Organization of American Historians as "America's peculiar form of Eurocentrism"[1] -- an exceptionalism that defines and affirms a people by negating others, who comprise their opposition. The eighteenth century idea that America represented a break from the European monarchist asylum, declared Appleby, served to unite the disparate colonies against a common foe, but it was also presented as a natural law and universal truth by which others were measured. Similarly, the new parochialism of the late twentieth century offers an adhesive, this time for a fracturing state bursting at the seams with an apparent excess of diversity.

Unlike its parent, however, this new parochialism represents a foreclosure that anchors itself to Europe against the tide of non- and therefore anti-European peoples. The global economy and advanced systems of communication and travel, they cite, have broken down national borders, even ideological walls, but have reconstructed racial and "tribal" allegiances that enable the survival and competitive edge of those groups. Undergirding the world-system are European or European-like values, ethics, and culture, from capitalism to the English language. In America, Eurocentrists, these new parochialists, proclaim union on the basis of race to counter the perceived threat of non-white "racial tribes" and to stifle dissenting voices from within its own ranks -- of women, workers, lesbians and gays, and those who would contest the dominant order.

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[1]Joyce Appleby, "Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism," *Journal of American History* 79:2 (September 1992): 420.

We know Eurocentrism as consort to the "meanness mania" that ran amok in the Reagan-Bush state, wherein "meanness" assumed the natures of both selfish and small-minded.[2] We know the new parochialism as the weapon of choice among the born-again, John Wayne gunslingers in their highnoon showdown along the frontiers of Western civilization. We know the new Eurocentrism as the postmodern incarnation of the old exceptionalism, spruced up for the occasion of late capitalism's assault against rebel bases within the heartland of the new world order.

To the left, another parochialism celebrates a minority's exceptionalism -- characterized (and sometimes caricatured) by inventions of traditions, affirmations of fragile identities, and exclusions of others, who comprise their opposition. Like some on the right who see racial conspiracies and perils, some on the left posit communities -- sisterhoods and brotherhoods -- that are no less imagined. The idea that minorities too had heroes and "great" civilizations, that minority scholars by virtue of their race can represent and speak for "their people," that minorities alone possess the virtues that the majority never owned reflect, rather than reject, its right ideological counterpart of racial and ethnic purity, authenticity, and boundaries. Eurocentrism's hegemony can never justify mimetic "isms" that create new hierarchies, privileges, and borderlands, nor should it invoke the same kind of closure witnessed in the neo-conservative circling of the wagons.

In truth, Ethnic Studies began with an alternative vision of American history and culture that was broadly inclusive. It started with the idea that American society consisted of Europeans, but also American Indians, Africans, Latinos, and Asians. It went on to propose that the histories of all of America's people were so intertwined that to leave out any group would result in sizeable silences within the master narrative. It

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[2]Although coined before the Reagan-Bush years, the term "meanness mania" captures the nation's mood that preceded, but characterized the 1980s. Gerald R. Gill, *Meanness Mania: The Changed Mood* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980).

noted a global dimension to the American experience, both in the imperial expansion of European peoples and in the incorporation of America's ethnic minorities. But beyond recapturing historical and contemporary realities and extending the community's reach, Ethnic Studies fundamentally sought to move the pivot, by fracturing the universalism of white men, and by repositioning gender, class, race, and sexuality from the periphery to the core, in a process that could be likened to the immigration described by Salman Rushdie as the "empire within." Indeed, the empire strikes back.

How might the history of Asians in America recenter the discourse?

Most U.S. history textbooks begin with Europe's search for Asia. Portugal's expeditions down the west coast of Africa to the Cape of Good Hope and into the Indian Ocean, and Spain's westward march were stimulated by mercantilist notions of trade with the "fabulous Orient." Christopher Columbus' "discovery" was of islands off the coast of Japan, as far as he was concerned, and as recorded in his log dated October 12, 1492, "the Admiral" went ashore, unfurled the royal banner, offered a prayer of thanksgiving, and took possession of the feminized land.[3]

Despite those obvious beginnings, our textbooks present us with only one vantage point and a narrow one at that. Their view is from the ship and not the shore; the view from the shore offered a contrary perspective on that encounter. Of course, we have known that for a long time, and yet its transformative power has been blunted. The Morison, Commager, and Leuchtenburg text, *The Growth of the American Republic*, begins with America's indigenous peoples, albeit from the purview of Europeans, whereby the first North American settlers were said to have come from Asia and were dubbed "our Mongoloid pilgrim fathers" who crossed the Bering Strait

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[3]*The Log of Christopher Columbus*, trans. Robert H. Fuson (Camden, Maine: International Marine Publishing, 1987), pp. 75-76.

in a "hypothetical fleet of Mongoloid *Mayflowers*."[4] And Blum, Morgan, Rose, Schlesinger, Stampp, and Woodward, in their text, *The National Experience*, reduce American Indians to "immigrants," who came to the Americas to "make use" of the land, thereby universalizing the European presence in the "New World."[5] They don't get it.

Perhaps of wider import, those shipboard histories, like shipboard romances, fail to locate their activities beyond the narrow confines of their quarters. Thus, while acknowledging the global context of the republic's founding, textbook authors are too easily dismissive of its implications and consequences. Editor David Thelen, in his inaugural effort to internationalize the *Journal of American History*, argued that U.S. history should be a compared history to enrich historical understanding and to strip it of its assumed exceptionalism. America's "discovery" and its subsequent settlement by European peoples were neither unique nor without precedent. Columbus sighted the "New World" through lenses already ground by others like the composite author of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, published in 1356, who claimed to have travelled from England to the Holy Land, Egypt, Arabia, and Asia to the court of the Great Khan in Cathay. Like Marco Polo, Mandeville described the marvels and monsters of the East, from the bounties of gold, silver, precious stones, cloves, nutmeg, and ginger, to the horrors of one-eyed and headless beasts, giants, pygmies, and cannibals.[6] The land and peoples of Columbus' "Indies," and that of English explorers Martin Frobisher and Walter Raleigh and Flemish cartographer Gerhardus Mercator, were just as surely Mandeville's and Polo's Asia and Asians.

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[4]Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Growth of the American Republic*, vol. 1, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 4.

[5]John M. Blum, Edmund S. Morgan, Willie Lee Rose, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kenneth M. Stampp, C. Vann Woodward, *The National Experience: A History of the United States*, 5th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), pp. 6-8.

[6]*The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (London: Macmillan, 1900).

Those representations, those texts, wrote literary scholar Mary Campbell, justified a "Christian imperialism" and were the means by which they "communicated -- and helped control -- a suddenly larger world."[7] But they also functioned to define the colonizer's identity as set apart from its negation -- the colonized -- who was everything the colonizer was not. In that sense, Europe's internationalization was accompanied by a racial parochialism that narrowed, rather than expanded, its definition of the human community. Resistance to Eurocentrism, thus, reintegrated the human family in the insistence of the colonized for equality and freedom. At the same time, as Frantz Fanon has warned, anti-imperialist nationalism unchecked can lead to another kind of separatism, another kind of tryanny, another kind of oppression. But that was a consequence, and not a cause of the initial colonization.

The Jamestown clearing, that flickering light of Western civilization amidst the beasts and gloom of the forest, had analogues in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. The Cape of Good Hope, separated from the dark interior by a ditch and hedge of almonds, was similarly settled by a northern European people, Calvinists, and men, who came to be imbued with a sense of manifest mission to fill and subdue the empty virgin land. In his book *White Supremacy*, George Fredrickson has given us an illuminating comparison of those two "implantations" at Jamestown and the Cape Colony, and we thereby see more clearly the trajectories and functions of racism, the natures of slavery and other forms of labor exploitation, and the rise of racialist nationalisms.[8] But we can also see them as stations built by Europeans in their passage to India.

Although the conquest and occupation of America moved westward in fits and starts, expansion was a dominant (and some would say a determining) feature, which for George Washington was like "driving the wild Beasts of ye forest . . . when the

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[7]Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 166.

[8]George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

gradual extension of our settlements will as certainly cause the savage, as the wolf, to retire; both being beasts of prey, tho' they differ in shape."[9] And in concurrence, Thomas Jefferson saw a relationship between that American "driving out" of Indians, whom he believed to have been an Asian people, and British imperialism in Asia. The "confirmed brutalization, if not extermination of this race in our America," he wrote, "is . . . to form an additional chapter in the English history of [oppression of] the same colored man in Asia . . . ."[10]

America's masculine thrust did not stop at its westernmost overland terminus, but continued across the Pacific to Asia, or in the words of Richard Drinnon, "when the metaphysics of Indian-hating hit salt water it more clearly became the metaphysics of empire-building. . . ."[11] In July 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry pushed into Tokyo Bay, carrying a letter from the United States president demanding the opening of trade relations. That "opening" of Japan was accomplished, like the "opening" of the American West, with the iron fist of industry and the might of military arms: Perry's "black ships" under full steam-power with matchless guns were complements of the iron horse and Kentucky rifle of the backwoodsmen, who were simultaneously taming the wilderness. Reflecting on the second period of America's manifest destiny, after the annexation of the Philippines and Hawaii in 1898 and after secretary of state John Hay's pronouncement of an "Open Door" with China, Theodore Roosevelt declared: "Of course our whole national history has been one of expansion. . . . That the barbarians recede or are conquered, with the attendant fact that peace follows their retrogression or conquest, is due solely to the power of the mighty civilized races which have not lost the fighting instinct, and which by their expansion are gradually

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[9]Quoted in Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (New York: New American Library, 1980), p. 65.
[10]*Ibid.*, p. 81.
[11]*Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.

bringing peace into the red wastes where the barbarian peoples of the world hold sway."[12]

The filling of those "red wastes," those empty, feminine spaces, was of course the white man's burden. John Hay, a son of the frontier of sorts, called attention to the beneficent quality of China's "open door" and America's "splendid little war" with Spain. "We have done the Chinks a great service," he wrote of his policy, "which they don't seem inclined to recognize," and he admonished the next generation of backwoodsmen, "as the children of Israel encamping by the sea were bidden, to Go Forward. . . ." Indeed, noted Hay, America had gone forward and had charted a "general plan of opening a field of enterprise in those distant regions where the Far West becomes the Far East."[13] In becoming a Pacific power, America had fulfilled a European people's destiny, and like Columbus, went ashore, unfurled the royal banner, offered a prayer of thanksgiving, and took possession of the feminized land. America's Far West had become the Far East, where Indian-fighters became "goo-goo" fighters in the Philippines and Indian savages became Filipino "niggers," and where a war of extermination was pursued no less than the "chastising" urged by George Washington of the Iroquois in 1779, when he instructed Major General John Sullivan: "But you will not by any means, listen to any overture of peace before the total ruin of their settlements is effected. . . . Our future security will be in their inability to injure us . . . and in the terror with which the severity of the chastizement they receive will inspire them."[14]

Europe's eastward and westward thrusts toward Asia are, as we know, only a part of the global context of American history. Within the capitalist world-system, Africans were carried west and Asians were carried east to the Americas in systems of

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[12]*Ibid.*, p. 332.
[13]*Ibid.*, pp. 277, 278.
[14]*Ibid.*, p. 331.

labor, bonded and free, that circled the Atlantic and Pacific as naturally as the ocean currents. And the internationalization of American history is only one element in this overall project of moving the pivot; the domestic sites of gender, class, race, and sexuality also comprise axes upon which the national experience turn. The study of Asians in America engages the new parochialisms at those sites, recognizing full well that the contest, dubbed "cultural wars," is not merely over a more expansive version of American history, but for a fundamental refiguring of America's social relations.

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